

Convincing Your Teen to See a Therapist

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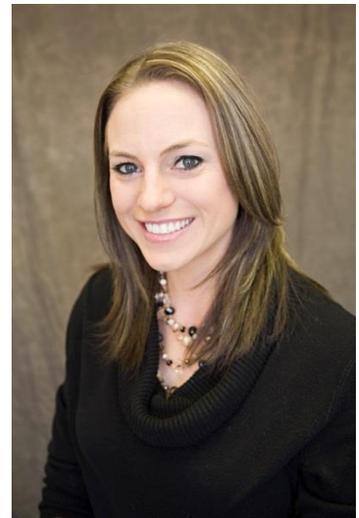
Many parents say, “I know my teen needs therapy, but I have no idea how to get him there.” It is common for a teenager to refuse therapy, or any help at all for that matter. Parents can use these practical suggestions to address common statements of resistance from teens and to focus on the importance and benefits of attending therapy.

“I don’t need therapy.” Understanding why a teen doesn’t want to go to therapy can help generate movement toward opening his or her mind to it. Most teens give the impression that there’s nothing “wrong” with them, so they don’t need therapy. No person, particularly a teenager, wants to feel like the choices he or she makes are bad or that there’s something “not right” with his or her life. Teens are developing their personal identity, and if they feel they are being judged, they may turn away from whatever their parents say or suggest. Recognizing this stage of life may be helpful when encouraging your teen to attend therapy.

Practical tip: Tell your teen that you don’t think something is wrong with him or her and that you’re not encouraging the therapy sessions to “fix” any flaws. Instead, explain that therapy can be a judgment-free time and place in which a person can talk with a therapist about the many important, stressful decisions he or she faces on a daily basis. Inform your teen that the therapist will not try to change or judge him or her for any past mistakes.

“This is unfair.” It can be helpful to remind your teen that therapy is not punishment. Framing therapy in a positive way can help your teen approach the process in the same manner. Teens are embarrassed easily, and they want to feel valued and respected for what they do.

Practical tip: Assure your teen that the therapist will gradually get to know and likely be impressed with him or her as person. Reassure your teen that you are proud of his or her accomplishments instead of focusing on the possible negative factors that may have been a cause for beginning therapy.



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“It’s nobody’s business.” Confidentiality is important to everyone, including (and perhaps especially) teenagers. Teens often resist going to therapy because they don’t want their parents to know everything about their lives. Teens also don’t want to feel that their parents and the therapist are ganging up on them. Teens often will say, “Why do I need a therapist? I have my friends to talk to” or “I feel better talking to my friends than some stranger.”

Practical tip: Explain that the therapy office is a private place and that conversations between therapists and clients are confidential. Remind your teen that you are not expecting the therapist to team up against him or her, but rather to be an additional support. Let your son or daughter know that you understand how important friends are and that you are not trying to stop him or her from talking with friends. Give your teen positive feedback when you notice him or her being social and having trusting relationships. Assure your teen that going to counseling will not take away friendships; instead, it may enrich them. (At Youth and Family Counseling, we encourage parents and teens to attend the first part of the initial session together to answer any questions and clarify confidentiality and boundary issues.)

Remember, if your teenager agrees to go to therapy, you’ve achieved success. Most teens’ actions speak louder than their words. If your teen continues to attend therapy, his or her actions will speak volumes as he or she shows positive growth. Parents should recognize that growth and credit their teen for following through with therapy.